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ABSTRACT

Carl Augusto, currently president and executive director of the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), describes his personal and professional experience with the National Library Service (NLS) for the Blind and Physically Handicapped and the talking books program. Topics discussed include AFB's history with its own talking book program founded by Helen Keller, the organization's role in developing the technology for long-playing records, its production of more that 500 titles on cassette every year, the launching of an award for talking-book narration, and the author's experience with the narrators. Augusto credits librarians with much of the success of the program and suggests that they can play an even more important role in the lives of the blind or print handicapped by learning about their needs. He also notes that only 30% of the working-age blind are employed and that the number of blind or severely visually impaired aged 65 and over will reach 5.8 million by 2030. (KRN)

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Reflections of a Lifetime Reader

An Address Delivered by
Carl R. Augusto
to the Conference of Librarians
Serving Blind and Physically Handicapped Individuals
Baltimore, Maryland • May 4, 1992

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Blind and physically handicapped individuals are entitled to a high quality, free public library service with access to all information, books, and materials perceived as useful. This is the charge under which the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped and the network of cooperating agencies function.

To review and focus our mission, we invited a distinguished user of braille and audio materials to meet with librarians and others assembled in conference to present views from a lifetime of reading. Carl R. Augusto was that person. This pamphlet is the second in a series of individual views that will be offered in the years ahead.

Frank Kurt Cylke
Director

National Library Service
for the Blind and
Physically Handicapped

Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.

September 1992

It's a special treat for me to be here to address the group responsible for the service that I as a blind person treasure more than any other, and I would like to pay tribute to all of you who make it happen.

Today, I would like to tell you a little bit about me — my personal experience as a patron of the NLS and also my professional affiliation with the talking-book program. I was not a patron of this program until my mid-twenties.

I began losing my vision at age eight due to a recessive gene disorder, which gradually progresses over life. But I was still reading print at a pretty good clip with low vision aids during high school. When I went to college, I began using books on tape from Recording for the Blind and also from a local volunteer organization. But never did I do much recreational reading. I always found recreational reading a little arduous. It was bad enough that I had to read all those textbooks, which did not come easily to me. So I didn't have the inclination to read something recreational.

There were several turning points that led me to become an avid reader of the program. A couple of years after I graduated from college, my sister was raving about a book that she had read. And she said, "Carl, you have to read this book." I said, "What is it about?" And she said, "It's about rabbits." I said, "I don't want to read about rabbits." She said, "It's not really about rabbits — read it."

A couple of months later a good friend of mine said, "I'm reading this great book." And I said, "What is it about?" He said, "It's about rabbits."

I had a lot of respect for both my sister and this guy, so I finally picked up this book. It was on rigid disk with a lot of scratches. But from the first minute on, I was mesmerized. Anybody want to take a guess what that book was? Right, *Watership Down.*

Well, I finished that book and I said, "Wow, fiction can be fun. I didn't realize that." They made me read all this fictional stuff in high school and college and it was boring.

I thought the narrator was especially good also. I didn't know it then, but that narrator, Alexander Scourby, is probably the most famous and prolific in the history of the program.

Another turning point was having kids. Having kids — for those of you that don't have them — requires more dishes and more laundry. Both of these were *my* household responsibilities and they were very boring tasks indeed, but when there are only two of you, that's no big deal. I quickly found out that when you have kids, the boring tasks are going to double. So I started reading talking books to pass the time, and I quickly discovered the time passed when I did read. I was getting hooked. All of a sudden doing the laundry and doing dishes were no longer tasks, but actually were my leisure time.

Today, my Talkman and my headset are constant companions. I commute on a train between New Jersey and New York City every day. It's about an hour and forty-five minutes. I do some work, some sleeping, and a lot of recreational reading. I also read while I'm exercising. It seems that every free minute of time I have, I'm reading.

The talking-book program has meant so much for so many people. If I took a poll of every visually impaired person, I believe that this program would be cited as the most valuable of any service.

When I served as a state vocational rehabilitation counselor for the blind, more people thanked me for introducing them to the program than for just about anything else I did. I've taken that as a reflection of the value of the program.

Since the early days, I've read countless books, but three books stand out. For pure enjoyment and suspense, *On the Wings of Eagles* by Ken Follett, who is my favorite international-intrigue author. It's the true story of H. Ross Perot and how he tried to rescue his employees from Iran shortly after the overthrow of the Shah.

Two books have had a profound impact on my professional life. I don't use her products or ride in pink Cadillacs, but Mary Kay Ashe knows how to write about supervision. She has a very short book called *Mary Kay on People Management* that I think is the best book on supervision I've read.

My management mentor is Tom Peters, and the third book I would like to mention is *Thriving on Chaos*. I recently reread that book, and it's a valuable piece of writing for those in management careers.

I learned braille also in my mid-twenties, before I really needed to know it. I didn't use it extensively until my mid-thirties. And although it would take me forever to read an entire book in braille, I do use braille every day for notes.

When I could see better, I was a geography nut and I could spend hours poring over maps, and I did. In the last three years, I've borrowed most of the braille maps that the NLS collection offers. I appreciate what NLS did about a year ago in producing a new USSR map.

Let me turn to my professional affiliation with the talking-book program. Most of you are well aware that the American Foundation for the Blind initiated the talking-book program back in the 1930s. The person who probably did more to get the funding and the support for the program was someone who could never benefit from it, and that was Helen Keller. Helen Keller was employed with the American Foundation for the Blind from 1924, three years after AFB was founded, until her death in 1968. She was a relentless advocate for the program. Not initially. Initially, she couldn't care less; although I'm not sure she would say it that way. But her teacher, Anne Sullivan Macy, was beginning to lose her vision, and Helen recognized what a value talking books would be to Anne Sullivan Macy. So she became an advocate — speaking before Congress and getting the funds needed to get the program off the ground.

One of the relatively unknown facts about AFB's involvement is that AFB stimulated the development of the technology for the long-playing record. You can imagine that your arms would get pretty tired if you read *War and Peace* on a batch of 78 rpm records. And that's what people had to do back in the early days. So you see that the 33-1/3 long-playing record made it a lot easier for blind people to sit back and relax for a few minutes before changing records. Look at how far the program has gone since then!

After only a very short time, AFB realized that it did not have the capacity to run the program itself and directly serve the increasing numbers of people who are blind and wanted the service. So the federal government took over and has done a superb job in expanding and improving the services, especially in the last fifteen to twenty years.

AFB is proud to continue to be a participant in the talking-book program. We produce more than 500 titles on cassette every year. We not only produce the masters in our studios; we also duplicate the masters onto cassettes. We have eight talking-book studios in New York, about seventy staff members, and about thirty active narrators at this time.

Approximately five years ago, in cooperation with all the organizations involved, we launched an awards ceremony to recognize excellence in talking-book narration. These awards were named after Alexander Scourby, who had just passed away. Annually, in the spring, we present the Scourby Award in a variety of categories: fiction, nonfiction, and children's books.

Two years ago, while on the Board of the American Foundation for the Blind, I was asked to make a presentation to one of the recipients. I was thrilled. I felt that I was handing out an Academy Award. Later, I felt I was backstage after the Academy Awards meeting some of the stars. To me and to thousands of other consumers in the program, these narrators are our stars. They're viewed much the same as the general public views movie stars.

Most of the narrators, from AFB at least, were there, and I remember walking around mingling with the group, asking to be introduced to as many narrators as possible, and being very tempted to ask for autographs. Last year I attended my second such ceremony. I was still on the Board, but not a member of the staff at that time. It was just as much a thrill the second time around as it was the first.

Since I've been on the staff of the American Foundation for the Blind, I've met several times with the narrators both in large groups and individually. Most of these people are in radio, TV, and the theater in New York. I'm so very impressed with their commitment to their work. They consult dictionaries constantly, and they also use reference materials to give them background on the subject matter they're reading. If they read about a particular country, more likely than not they're going to check an encyclopedia to know more about the country, and read other books about that country. Typically, they're proficient in more than one language.

They consult many sources to make sure they're pronouncing the words correctly. One narrator told me of an incident where he just wasn't sure about the pronunciation of a Greek word, and the Greek dictionary didn't give

him clear information, so he started walking around to Greek restaurants in New York City to take a poll on how the word was pronounced.

These people truly love their work. They're very committed to the program. The fan mail they receive means a great deal to them. Their only regret is that they can't meet in person the recipients of their services more often.

Naturally, there are many people other than the narrators contributing to the program: NLS and all of its staff, the libraries and all of their staff, everybody involved at AFB, and the employees of the other producers of talking books. All deserve credit for doing such an outstanding job. Perhaps the real unsung heros are the studio monitors. You never hear them, but they follow along with the narrators to ensure that the book is read accurately.

AFB is very committed to the talking-book program, and we hope to continue to have a long and productive relationship with NLS and its participating libraries.

You, as librarians, deserve much of the credit for the success of this program. However, you can play an even more important role in the lives of people who are blind or print handicapped, than the provision of books and braille materials and other reference materials. Here's how:

First of all, I think it's important that you learn as much as you can about the needs of people who are blind and print handicapped. There are many ways

you can do that. You can read books about the psychology and the adjustment to disability. Read the magazines of the national consumer organizations: the *Braille Forum* of the American Council of the Blind, the *Braille Monitor* of the National Federation of the Blind. Read the newsletters of the national organizations and get put on their mailing lists. Read the newsletters of local agencies, public and private. Subscribe to the journals that are available, such as AFB's *Journal of Visual Impairment and Blindness*. Regularly attend the meetings of the consumer groups in your community. Regularly attend the meetings of the professional groups in your state. I knew one librarian who was an official member of both the local chapter of the ACB and the local chapter of the NFB. She was sighted. She served as secretary of both organizations. That, in my opinion, is true commitment.

It's often been said that NLS and the participating libraries know the names of more blind and visually impaired people than any other single source. Think about that. Think about how you can influence and inform people who are visually impaired. I don't know if all of you produce newsletters. But if you don't, please start doing them. I applaud the newsletter of the library that served me in Cincinnati for six years, and also the newsletters I currently receive from the New Jersey Library for the Blind. Both are very informative and provide valuable information to me and many other readers. So keep it up. If you do publish newsletters, continue doing so and expand them.

There are a couple of statistics that concern me. Of those who are blind or visually impaired of working age, which is eighteen to sixty-five, only 30 percent are working. You have an opportunity to provide employment-related information through your newsletters — information on resources and information on employment. You can coordinate that information with your state rehabilitation agency.

Another interesting statistic: 70 percent of those who are blind or severely visually impaired are sixty-five years of age and older. That number, 2.5 million people, has doubled in the last thirty years. It will double again in the next thirty years. By the year 2030, America will have a population of 5.8 million people who are blind or severely visually impaired. Now, you can imagine what that's going to mean to the National Library Service. We need to support — a lot more vigorously than we have in the past — the National Library Service and its request for federal funds.

Let me close by saying thank you so very, very much on behalf of all the people who are your patrons for the information, for the enjoyment, for the laughter, for the tears, for the suspense, for the adventure, for the comfort, and the for pure pleasure you provide to us. You've certainly enriched my life and the lives of thousands of others in the program.

Carl R. Augusto

Mahwah, New Jersey

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